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DE RUEHLH #0196/01 2870555
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMCONSUL LAHORE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4189
INFO RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD IMMEDIATE 4890
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL IMMEDIATE 0499
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0202
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0879
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI PRIORITY 2156
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR PRIORITY 1836
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE PRIORITY 5348

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 LAHORE 000196

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PK](#)

SUBJECT: BLASPHEMY ACCUSED DIES IN POLICE CUSTODY IN NORTHEAST
PUNJAB

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A young Pakistani Christian man died in police custody, three days after he was arrested and charged with blasphemy. On September 11, 20-year-old Fanish Masih, an illiterate sweeper, allegedly grabbed a copy of the Quran from a teenage Muslim girl and threw it in the drain. Word of the incident spread, and a mob of 100 people set fire to a church and ransacked the houses of two Christians in Jaithikey village, northeastern Punjab. Police arrested and charged Masih with blasphemy on September 12. Three days later, police announced that Masih had been found dead in his cell and claimed that he had committed suicide. This was the third incident of mob violence against Christians in Punjab Province since late July, in revenge for alleged blasphemy, and stoked by Muslim clerics during Friday prayers. End Summary.

Angry Mob Torches Church

¶2. (SBU) According to Katherine Karamat, Program Officer, Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS), on September 11 in Jaithikey village, Tehsil Sambrial, Sialkot district, 20-year-old Christian Fanish Masih snatched a copy of the Quran from 15-year-old Muslim Hina Ashgar as she left the local mosque. Masih threw the Quran in the drain. Masih and Ashgar had developed a friendship, defying cultural norms that permit women only to interact with male relatives. Walking home from the mosque, Ashgar stopped to talk to Masih. Her mother spotted them and began yelling, causing Masih to run away and Ashgar to drop the books she was holding, according to Karamat. Ashgar's mother, angered by the relationship, shouted that Masih had desecrated the Quran. Local Muslim leaders immediately called for revenge from mosque loudspeakers and held rallies after Friday prayers. Around midnight on September 11, a 100-member-strong mob burned a church and looted two adjacent houses in Jaithikey village. The crowd, armed with bricks and kerosene, torched the church and rallied in the streets, calling for Masih's immediate arrest.

Death of Accused in Police Custody

¶3. (SBU) Sambrial police registered a First Information Report (FIR) on behalf of Muhammad Ali Ashgar, Hina Ashgar's father, against Masih charging him with desecration of the Holy Quran under Section 295-B of the Pakistan Penal Code. Sambrial police arrested Masih on September 12. After an initial court date on

September 13, he was sent to District Jail in Sialkot on September 14. On September 15, Masih was discovered dead in his jail cell. Sialkot police claimed the boy hung himself from the door of his solitary confinement cell with the drawstring from his pants. This was a lie, according to Karamat, and Lawrence Saldanha, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Lahore. Both told Post that there were signs of torture on Masih's body. Sialkot police refused to release Masih's body to his parents for burial in his native village of Jaithikey, approximately 12 miles away.

On September 17, Masih was laid to rest by family members amid protests at a Christian graveyard in Sialkot. Protesters, who had demanded Masih be buried in Jaithikey, clashed with police, staged a sit-in, burned tires and attacked nearby shops. Hundreds of Christians, including Christian Members of the National Assembly Nelson Azeem and Akram Gill, and Kamran Michael, Provincial Minister for Human Rights, Minorities Affairs and Women Development, attended the memorial service.

Action against Police, Calls for Change

¶4. (SBU) On September 17, Sialkot Civil Lines police registered a FIR against the Superintendent of the Sialkot district jail, charging him with inflicting physical injury under Pakistan Penal Code Section 319. On September 16 Federal Minister for Minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti, ordered an inquiry into the death. On September 17 Punjab Provincial Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), appointed Sialkot District and Sessions Judge Tariq Iftikar to conduct an inquiry into Masih's death. Kamran Michael, Punjab Provincial Minister for Human Rights, publically condemned the violence in Sialkot.

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Punjab Provincial Governor Salman Taseer, Pakistan Peoples Party, called for the repeal of the blasphemy law on September ¶18. Religious parties have since accused Taseer of committing blasphemy by seeking the law's repeal, and called for his resignation. Chief Minister Sharif told Principal Officer that PPP was too weak on religious issues to repeal the blasphemy law. Only a change in administration, from PPP to PML-N, would result in a party with enough support from the religious community to institute a real change to the law.

Blasphemy Law in Action in the Case at Hand

¶15. (SBU) Masih, an illiterate sweeper, is a typical member of the Pakistani Christian community. The majority of Christians are uneducated laborers who comprise the lowest level of Pakistani society. Social discrimination makes them particularly vulnerable to blasphemy charges, and many do not understand or trust the legal system. In the Masih case, a mother who disapproved of her daughter's relationship with a Christian man served as the sole witness to Masih's "blasphemy."

The girl's father, with only second-hand knowledge of the incident, registered the FIR. Police investigated no further and arrested Masih the next day. Had Masih lived to have his day in court, his ignorance of the content of the book(s) he allegedly pulled from the girl's hands would have been no defense to the charge.

Comment: The Need for Change

¶16. (SBU) The blasphemy law as written is problematic, and every new blasphemy incident illustrates its shortfalls. Punjab Governor Taseer's call to repeal the blasphemy law and, the Chief Minister's investigation of the incident are positive signs. We will continue to express our concerns with provincial leaders, expecting change to come but slowly. End Comment.
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